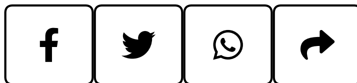
Living Abraham's Legacy: Relevance of Rites and Rituals in the Modern Age

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Introduction

Images of the yearly *Hajj* (annual pilgrimage to Makkah) continue to capture the attention of the world. As people witness the synchronization of actions and purpose of millions of pilgrims, they experience amazement and wonderment. People often ask, "**Why is the *Hajj* important**?" or "What is the purpose of pilgrimage rituals in this day and age?" In this paper, we discuss the power of rituals in general and focus on the various benefits and significance of the *Hajj* rituals in particular. In the course of this discussion, we embark on a whirlwind tour of relevant material from anthropology, psychology, theology, jurisprudence, exegesis, philosophy, and—most importantly—**Islamic spirituality**.

Why Do Rituals Exist?

In the modern world, religious rituals are seen only as vestiges of the Dark Ages which society has outgrown in light of modern industrialization. For many, material profit is the paramount virtue, and the only worthy goal of human behavior. Such a narrative portrays ritual practices as irrational behaviors that do not provide tangible value, and whose goals can be better achieved through economic and technological advancement. According to Catherine Bell, "The popular contention that ritual and religion decline in proportion to modernization has been something of a sociological truism since the mid-19th century."[1] This conventional wisdom sets the idea of ritual in direct opposition to reason itself. As Schilbrack described, "while primitive minds need ritual to calm their fears and make 'sense' of what was not really understood, with the maturation of reason and the development of modern science we have naturally dropped those practices."[2]
As rituals did not relate to matters that could be examined within the realm of the physical world, they were seen as unbefitting any rational educated person. Ritual was also perceived as irrational due to its disinterest in material goods. The very notion of expending resources such as money, time, and energy without receiving material return was seen as a mindless and backward practice.[3]
However, academics have come to recognize this as a simple-minded caricature of the value and relevance of rituals. Since the mid-twentieth century, this "secularization thesis" has been rejected by a growing number of sociologists who point to the fundamental function of ritual in all aspects of human life. Rituals are increasingly seen as inherent to human behavior, changing in their details yet constantly present in the human experience.

...all societies are equally ritualized; they merely practice different rituals. If most people in industrialized societies no longer go to church regularly or practice elaborate rituals of initiation, this does not mean that ritual has declined. All that has happened is that new types of ritual—political, sporting, musical, medical, academic and so on—have taken the place of the traditional ones.[4]

Indeed, rituals are embedded in every society and manifest not only in religious practices but within social, political, and even mundane daily activities. Consider one of the most ubiquitous rituals—the handshake. What does it represent? An ancient custom that perhaps originated as an act to demonstrate the absence of concealed weapons, this gesture has come to symbolize a mutual acknowledgment of courtesy, welcome, respect, dignity, trust, non-confrontation, and peace. These cognitive and emotional states are collectively bound up in a single human gesture.

We can find rituals almost anywhere we look: rallies, marches, festivities, celebrations, coronations, inaugurations, etc. In civic life, ritual ceremonies continue to be performed for marriages and funerals, the abandonment of which would seem to deprecate the significance of these life events entirely. Whether it be by exchanging gifts, expressing compliments or condolences, entertaining guests, visiting relatives, working only on weekdays, or singing nursery rhymes to children, we see how rituals continue to play a prominent role within nearly all human activity.

The reason rituals matter, and why they remain central to human activity, is because they transcend verbal communication. They allow humans to express shared sentiments of meaning and value. They provide a language that is incredibly versatile, which allows mutual recognition of the significance of a particular event, entity, or relationship. As Bell notes, "rather than ritual as the vehicle for the *expression* of authority, practice theorists tend to explore how ritual is a vehicle for the *construction* of relationships of authority and submission."[5]

Schilbrack, building off the work of Pierre Bourdieu, likens rituals to social "calls to order" which "awaken deeply buried corporeal dispositions."[6] Rituals are thus likened to acts of protests, wherein the ritual itself, through the process of gathering and chanting, can rekindle or regenerate feelings and emotions within the participants.

For this reason, rituals will always remain a significant part of our collective lives. The ability to construct purpose and meaning, to change or touch deep emotions, is a power that cannot be replaced within the human experience.

Rituals in the Spiritual Realm

Rituals that pertain to spirituality demonstrate the greatest potency in constructing meaning and awakening deep emotional states in those who participate. Through the use of ritual, we attempt to articulate the ineffable. Rituals allow us to condense vast arrays of meaning, spectrums of emotion, notions of virtue, all into the span of often momentary gestures. That which challenges the boundaries of our human experience and transcends the limitations of our verbal communication is accessed and expressed via spiritual practice and religious ritual.

Returning to the modern description of rituals as irrational, we now recognize that this short-sighted perception stems, predominantly, from an inability to see beyond the physical movements and motor behavior involved in a ritual, while remaining oblivious to the metaphysical significance of the acts being performed. The Qur'an addresses this head-on when discussing the ritual sacrifice of an animal: "Their meat will not reach Allah, nor will their blood, but what reaches Him is piety from you" (Qur'an 22:37). The physical action is but the external shell of what is a spiritual exercise aimed at achieving nearness to God through the symbolic language of sacrifice: giving up what is dear to oneself (wealth/property/time/effort) to **express one's love for the Divine and one's submission to His will**. The outward actions are actually symbols for what is on the inside. In fact, Allah describes rituals as symbols of our spirituality in the Qur'an: "And whoever honors the symbols of Allah—indeed, it is from the piety of hearts" (Qur'an 22:32).

Conversely, the exact same physical action could be performed, but when unaccompanied by the required spiritual state, motivation and intention, it may fail to achieve the status of accepted worship (*Qabool*). Consider these two statements of the **Prophet Muhammad ﷺ**: "Whoever does not abandon false speech and bad behavior, God has no need of their abandonment of food and drink (in fasting),"[7] and "It may be that someone fasts the entire day and gains nothing from it but hunger, and it may be that someone stands the night in prayer and gains nothing from it but lack of sleep."[8]

A key feature of rituals seems to be their recurring nature. But repetition does not diminish significance or meaningfulness. How many times does one say to their spouse, "I love you"? In spite of repetition, these words never lose their meaning or strength, rather they intensify. Thus it is with our expressions of love for God, our prayers, our supplications, our statements of "All praise belongs to Allah," and "Glory be to Allah," and so forth. These actions, when performed with mindfulness and reflection, strengthen our spirituality and allow us to ascend to higher levels of love and conviction.

Though they are *supra-rational,* ritual practices are prescribed with explicitly rational ends in mind—the spiritual elevation and felicity of humankind in this life and the next. On the other hand, Muslims are forbidden from rituals that are *anti-*

rational/irrational; i.e., rituals that do not make sense in either the natural or spiritual realm. Nonsensical rituals appeal to superstitious notions about how the natural world operates. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ told his companions that eclipses are not a consequence of the birth or death of any individual. Spiritually irrational rituals make claims about what the Divine has ordained that are unsubstantiated by scriptural evidence (see for instance verses 6:138 and 5:103, which describe rituals of the pagan Arabs related to designating certain animals to be prohibited for use because of superstitious customs; God concludes the latter verse stating "most of them do not use their reason," thereby establishing that ritual practices should not be anti-rational).

Purpose of Islamic Rituals

Islamic rituals, or *'Ibadat*, remain a subject of great interest amongst Muslim theologians and jurists. However, most Islamic scholarship is concerned with the functionality of Islamic rituals rather than their ultimate purpose. Jurists focus on the categorization of rituals as well as the legality of form, while theologians are concerned primarily with their connection to theological principles.

This does not mean that the underlying purpose of *'Ibadat* is unimportant or unaddressed, but rather that it seems to be a muted conversation, likely due to the lack of controversy around it. Recognizing the relative scarcity of writing on this topic, some of the works in the field of *tazkiyya al-nafs* (purification of the soul) have endeavored to highlight the underlying ethos of what **Islamic worship** is all about.

Indeed, the purpose that drives Islamic rituals is important as we reflect over the specific rituals of the *Hajj* and particularly as we consider the emotions the *Hajj* experience seeks to awaken within the believer.

'Ibadat is derived from the word *'abd*, meaning servant or slave. According to *Lisan al-'Arab*, *'abd* is rooted in the meaning of humility or subservience and this is likened to the ancient Arabic phrase of *al-tareeq al-ma'bad*, or the path which is an 'abd, denoting a path that is well-traveled and flattened due to excessive passage upon it.[9]

It is through these meanings that Muslim scholars understood the concepts of *'Ubudiya* (servitude) and *'Ibadat* (rituals), all derived from the same root word (*'abd*). After all, God could have used different terminology to describe religiosity and devotion yet specifically chose to define the relationship between God and believer through derivatives of the word *'abd*.

Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 H) comments on this by explaining that,

Ritualized devotion ('Ibadah) is the convention of fulfillment of one's love of the

Divine, paired with the fulfillment of one's humility towards the Divine. The 'abd is then the humbled lover (of God).[10]

Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 H) expounded on this definition stating that,

Ritualized devotion ('Ibadah) is the highest station of love. It is a popular saying that: 'Love has enslaved him ('abdahu) as though he is property' and this is the true love of the Divine.[11]

In both definitions, we can see clearly how Islamic scholars tied the idea of rituals to the realization of human emotions. In this sense, the form of a ritual is not fully meaningful without it awakening the necessary emotions (namely love of, and humility before, God). In fact, as Abu Hilal Al-Askari (d. 395 H) noted, "there are no rituals (*'Ibadah*) except through knowing the Divine,"[12] meaning rituals lack spirit or substance without an emotional connection and an imagination of the Divine. Thus every Islamic ritual (*'Ibadah*), be it prayer, fasting, charity or Hajj, seeks to create and awaken deep emotions within the practitioner. It is important to also remember that even when our worship may fall short of experiencing that heartful presence (*Hudur al-Qalb*), it still retains merit with God because we are doing our best to strive to reach that level.

Islamic rituals are also symbolic in nature. When Muslim jurists differed over a particular form or physical pose in the *Salah* (daily prayer) ritual, in the absence of explicit scripture, they would typically rely on whichever pose was seen as denoting greater humility towards the Divine. This is because Muslim scholars understood that every ritual has symbolic meanings underlying each act.

In effect, our *Salah* is the language of the body just as our *Tasbeeh* (declaring the glory of God) is the language of our tongue. When we fall prostrate in *Sujud* we are verbalizing with our bodies the affirmation of His Divine Lordship and Oneness, just as we verbalize it on our tongues with the *Shahadah* (testimony of faith).

Hajj: Abraham's Legacy

In the Qur'an, Abraham (peace be upon him) is repeatedly referenced as the central figure in the *Hajj* story. Abraham is described as being guided to the place of the House (i.e., the Ka'bah) in Makkah (Qur'an 22:26), and as the builder of the Ka'bah along with his son Ishmael, the patriarch of the Makkan Arabs (Qur'an 21:27). In the *hadith* literature, the rituals of *Hajj* are explicitly referred to as "a legacy from the legacies of Abraham (*irth Ibrahim*)."[13]

Understanding the **life of Abraham** plays a powerful role in understanding the rituals

of *Hajj*. Through these rituals, pilgrims are able to connect themselves to a shared history and to the legacy of Abraham and his family.

For this reason, even the pre-Islamic Arabs practiced the *Hajj*, despite departing from Abraham's monotheism. The *Hajj* connected them to their forefathers (Abraham and Ishmael) even as they embraced polytheism which contradicted the basis of Abraham's message.

Yet this represents one of the greater overarching goals of the *Hajj* rituals: *the ability to connect to a shared history, narrative, and community*. Through the motions and rites of *Hajj* the believer takes a step back from their specific moment in time and appreciates the larger tradition that binds them to billions of people throughout history.

Part of the unique story of *Hajj* presented in the Qur'an is that Abraham was the first man tasked to proclaim the duty of *Hajj* to others (Qur'an 22:27). Yet, Abraham is also largely presented in the Qur'an as a man with nearly no followers besides his own immediate family. The Qur'an refers to Abraham as a "nation unto himself," referencing his isolation (Qur'an 16:120).

Yet the Abrahamic call for *Hajj* is somehow answered generations afterwards, with millions of people from every corner of the world striving to follow his footsteps. It represents a message of hope, optimism, and trust in God and reveals how the most unlikely outcomes can be achieved with God's Will.

The *Hajj* also represents the ability to connect to a larger nation and community. That millions of people, male and female, past and present, from different races, ethnicities, and ages can synchronize rites and rituals, driven by common purpose, provides the pilgrim with a powerful experience of shared brotherhood and kinship that cannot be experienced otherwise.

Perhaps most noteworthy in this regard is the testimony of Malcolm X, who was widely known for his anti-White rhetoric (due to his experiences in racially segregated America), yet renounced most of that rhetoric after experiencing the *Hajj*. He commonly spoke of being changed by Makkah and described the transformative nature of the *Hajj* through his letter from the pilgrimage:

There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white….

During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug)—while praying to the same God with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were

the bluest of the blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the 'white' Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan and Ghana. We are truly all the same—brothers.[14]

This beautifully illustrates how the *Hajj* rituals tap into deep human emotions and provide the opportunity to transform behavior towards the positive. They connect us to a purpose larger than ourselves, to a community larger than our own, and to a legacy and history of greatness: the legacy of Abraham.

The Symbolism Of The *Hajj* Rituals

As we have previously discussed, Islamic rituals are not aimless in purpose but rather seek to evoke emotions in the hearts of believers. The **rites and rituals of** *Hajj* are no exception. In fact, the Qur'an specifies the goal of 'inclining hearts' (i.e., emotions and passions) through the mechanism of *Hajj*. This is mentioned in the prayer of Abraham, which is then fulfilled by God through the commandment of *Hajj*:
Our Lord, I have settled some of my descendants in an uncultivated valley near Your sacred House, our Lord, that they may establish prayer. So make hearts among the people incline toward them and provide for them from the fruits that they might be grateful. (Qur'an 14:37)
This is referred to once again when the Qur'an references the rites of slaughter: "Their meat will not reach Allah, nor will their blood, but what reaches Him is piety from you" (Qur'an 22:37).
Thus, by examining each rite and ritual of *Hajj* we are able to uncover the spiritual meanings intended by each practice. We begin to understand how each ritual embodies meanings that transcend the capacities of verbal expression and that connect the participant to a richness of spirituality, tradition, and community.

The Symbolism of *Tawaf*

Tawaf (lit. circling) is the ritual of circling the Ka'bah (House of God) seven times during the *Hajj* (pilgrimage) or Umrah (lesser pilgrimage). The *Tawaf* is the ritual most associated with the Hajj, providing the iconic image of millions of people circling the Ka'bah in Makkah.
The Ka'bah is said to be the first house built on earth to worship God, the very first sanctuary devoted solely to glorify our Creator.[15] The Qur'an refers to the Ka'bah as a "*Mathabah* (lit. place of retreat or resort) for mankind" and as "the House" (i.e., the House

of God) (Qur’an 2:125). In this sense, being in the presence of the Ka’bah provides its own spiritual benefit, allowing believers to recharge and rekindle their sense of faith and connection to God. Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505 H) writes:

> ***As for Tawaf around God’s House, then know that it is a form of prayer, so fill your heart with the same reverence, fear, hope and love that we have described in the book of prayer. And recognize that in your Tawaf, you are emulating the honorable angels encircling the Divine throne, making Tawaf around it. And do not presume that the point is merely the Tawaf of your physical body, but rather what is intended is the Tawaf of your heart with the remembrance of the Lord of the House, until your thoughts in life start and finish with His remembrance, just as the Tawaf of the House is the beginning and the ending of Hajj. Recognize that the sacred Tawaf is the the Tawaf of the heart with the presence of God’s Lordship, and the Tawaf around God’s House is merely the symbolic representation in the physical world of that spiritual process in the unseen realm. This is similar to how the body is the representation in the physical world of the qalb (spiritual heart) which exists in the unseen world.***[16]

While many non-Muslims have the misconceptions that Muslims worship the Ka’bah, it is important to remember that there is nothing inherently sacred about its bricks, mortar, or cloth. In reality, what is important is what the Ka’bah represents—the *qiblah* or direction Muslims face in their prayers to God. Muslims used to pray towards Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem during the first phase of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ’s preaching. When the *qiblah* was changed from Masjid al-Aqsa to the Ka’bah, God revealed an important reminder in the Qur’an that physical directions and physical structures are not intrinsically sacred. Rather, their sanctity comes from God assigning significance to them and imbuing them with meaning:

> ***Righteousness is not about turning your faces toward the east or the west, but rather true righteousness is about one’s faith in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets. And it’s about giving one’s wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler, those who ask for help, and for freeing slaves; it’s about establishing prayer and giving zakat in charity and being those who fulfill their promise when they promise and who are patient in poverty and hardship and times of peril. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who are the righteous.*** **(Qur’an 2:177)**

Similarly, kissing the Black Stone during *Tawaf* is a symbolic act of penitence and **repentance**.[17] It is related that Umar ibn al-Khattab kissed the stone and said, “By Allah, I know that you are nothing but a stone and if I had not seen Allah's Messenger ﷺ kissing you, I would not have kissed you.”[18]

The act of *Tawaf* reminds believers that God should be at the center of our lives, just as the Ka'bah remains the center of the ritual. It is an act of submission and subservience that recognizes that though believers have willingly placed God at the central point of their devotion, our entire existence revolves around God, whether we recognize it or not.

The Symbolism of *Sa'i*

Sa'i (lit. seeking, searching) is the ritual of walking between the two hills (*Al-Safa and Al-Marwa*). This ritual commemorates the story of Hajar and her son Ishmael. The two were left in a barren desert by Abraham, under the instruction of God. Hajar reportedly called out to Abraham, questioning him on why he was abandoning her and their infant son in an empty desert. Abraham would not respond until she asked him, "Has God ordered you to do this?" He replied affirmatively and she replied with full conviction in God, "In that case, He will not abandon us." [19]

Hajar returned to her infant son and, as the baby cried from hunger, she began running between *Al-Safa* and *Al-Marwa*, searching for anything or anyone who might be able to help them. Hajar ran between the two mountains seven times in desperation. She then witnessed the Archangel Gabriel at the feet of her baby, who struck his heel into the ground, causing a spring of water to gush forth that later became known as *Zamzam*.[20] Later, people from the tribe of Jurhum came and settled in the area, respectfully taking permission from Hajar to make use of the water of *Zamzam*, and in this manner, the city of Makkah came into existence.

Here is where the *Hajj* ritual of *Sa'i* was born and Hajar's story is pivotal in understanding the narrative of *Hajj*. Her story is one of utmost devotion, conviction, certitude, and trust in God above all else. That a mother would be willing to accept the fate of being abandoned in a barren desert with her breastfeeding child, because she was certain it was the desire of God, displays the greatest example of trusting in God.

Her running between the mountains, as emulated by pilgrims to this day, reminds us of the desperation and need we all have for the aid of God. As an unnamed Muslim scholar said: "Know that the one who is stranded at sea, clinging to a board, and tossed and turned by its waves, is not in any greater need of God than you." It revives the metaphysical awareness that, without the constant support of God, we would be worse off than stranded at sea or in the middle of a barren desert.

Hajar's example is also cherished for her unbridled optimism and hope in God and in His promise. As the pilgrims run between the mountains, they recognize Hajar's unwavering optimism despite the arduous struggle she was enduring. It reminds believers that no matter the magnitude of hardship they face, they should continue to be hopeful in

striving and seeking a solution. Hajar knew that God's sustenance would come to those who seek it and struggle for it.

There is something most fascinating about the *Sa'i* ritual and what it represents. In a way, this is the ritual at the root of Islam's ancestry, representing the very origin story of Makkah itself. All the other rituals commemorate events that occurred after Hajar's *Sa'i* in the desert. What is truly remarkable about this ritual is the person we emulate. Through it we commemorate the faith in God held by Hajar—a woman, originally a slave girl from Egypt, possessing no status, fame, or wealth. And yet, her devotion to God was so beloved to Him that He established it as an eternal ritual to be followed by people all over the world. *A righteous woman,* in whose footsteps millions of men are commanded to walk. As the *hadith* states, "That was your mother, O children of the Heavenly water."[21]

The *Sa'i* represents a rich tradition. It is truly remarkable that for thousands of years, men and women have emulated the steps of a woman of common birth whose status was elevated by her emotional connection to, and physical sacrifice for, the Divine.

Moreover, just as all the rituals of *Hajj* have a connection with the events in the afterlife, the ritual of *Sa'i* has also been linked to our state on the Day of Judgment. Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali explains that this ritual of going between Safa and Marwa has been connected to the scales of good deeds and bad deeds on the Day of Judgment.[22] Every human being's life contains a mixture of good and bad, moments of virtue and success alongside moments of sin and failure. Similarly, racing between these two mountains signifies our journey between these two opposites and our hope that our good predominates over our bad in our scales on the Day of Judgment.

The Symbolism of *'Arafah*

'Arafah is the name of a mountain range, along with the surrounding plains, just east of Makkah.[23] *Yawm 'Arafah* (the day of *'Arafah*) is the 9th day of Dhul Hijjah in the Islamic calendar. On *Yawm 'Arafah* pilgrims all gather on Mount *'Arafah* and the surrounding plains and spend the day, until sunset, beseeching God for forgiveness.

The *Hajj* rites and rituals typically have windows of time during which they must be completed. The gathering at *'Arafah,* on the day of *'Arafah,* is the one ritual which gathers all pilgrims in the same exact place and at the same exact time, performing the same rites. In fact, the Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said "***Hajj* is *'Arafah***,"[24] meaning it is the ritual that is paramount in the *Hajj* experience.

Yawm 'Arafah holds considerable significance in the Islamic tradition. First, it is the day on which God revealed verse 5:3 which proclaims the perfection of the Islamic tradition

and the finality of religious laws that would be revealed to mankind. Second, it is known as the day of the covenant. This refers to a prior existence or consciousness during which God took an oath from every soul. This incident is referenced in the Qur'an:

***And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we have testified." [This]—lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, "Indeed, we were of this unaware."* (Qur'an 7:172)**

Finally, it is a day marked by forgiveness and God's pleasure. In one tradition, the Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said: "There is no day on which God frees more servants from the fire than the day of *'Arafah*."[25] In another tradition, he said: "God boasts to the angels about the people of *'Arafah*, (saying): 'Look at My Servants, they have come to Me in the morning in a desolate state, with dusty hair, having crossed every deep valley. I call you to witness that I have forgiven them.'"[26] The magnitude of God's forgiveness on this day of intense prayer and immense repentance is so great that many of the scholars and ascetics used to say, "Of the greatest of sins is for one to attend *'Arafah* and then think that Allah has not forgiven him."[27] The attitude of the believer is one of hope, optimism, and positive thoughts about God, knowing that God's Mercy encompasses all. Just as *'Arafah* is known as the day of the covenant, in reference to a day preceding the birth of mankind in our current existence, *'Arafah* also ignites the imagination of the believer towards the afterlife and the day of resurrection.

The day of resurrection has a number of epithets in the Qur'an, including the day of accounting (*yawm al-Hisab*),[28] the day of disaster (*yawmun 'Aqeem*),[29] the day of distress (*yawm al-Hasrah*).[30] But many of the names of the Final Daybear a striking similarity to the day of *'Arafah*. These include the Day of Standing (*yawm al-Qiyamah*),[31] the day of being brought out (*yawm al-Khurooj*),[32] and the day of meeting (*yawm al-Talaaq*).[33] When the pilgrim witnesses so many people gathered in one place, at one time, desperately pining for the grace of God, it inevitably evokes images of the day of resurrection. The clothing of *Hajj* is also marked by simple white sheets, analogous to the shrouds used to wrap the dead. All of these elements combine to make the day of 'Arafah a compelling reminder of our mortality and our eventual resurrection. It reminds the pilgrim of their eventual standing before God, answering for their deeds.

The Symbolism of *Muzdalifah*

After spending the day praying and making du'a at *'Arafah*, the next step in *Hajj* is leaving '*Arafah* after sunset and spending the night at a location called *Muzdalifah*, an empty area

on the outskirts of Makkah. The word linguistically comes from the root *zulfa* which implies to draw closer or to gather, and this is where pilgrims gather outside of Makkah.[34] At this location, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ combined his sunset (*maghrib*) and night (*'isha*) prayers,[35] and then departed at dawn the next day to return to *Mina*. During the night, pilgrims sleep under the open sky, disconnected from the distractions and comforts of worldly life, lying in the open upon the rocks.

The stay in *Muzdalifah* is something ordained in the Qur'an itself:

When you depart from 'Arafah, remember Allah at al-Mash'ar al-Haram (the sacred site). And remember Him, as He has guided you, for indeed, you were before that among those astray. **(Qur'an 2:198)**

The sacred site referred to in this verse is none other than *Muzdalifah*. In this verse, the believers are instructed to remember God and worship Him according to the precise manner in which He has guided us, not according to the manner in which He was worshipped during the days of misguidance prior to Islam. Indeed, the pagan idolaters in the pre-Islamic era included *'Arafah* and *Muzdalifah* in their rituals, but the Islamic tradition requires believers to depart *'Arafah* after sunset and *Muzdalifah* before the sun has risen completely, in contrast to how the idolaters left the former before sunset and the latter after sunrise.

One may wonder, what is the significance of such seemingly trivial changes? Sometimes the differences between two choices in life may seem subtle, but the consequences may be drastic. Developing the discipline and conscientious habits to adhere as closely and rigorously to what is right even in difficult circumstances is an essential pillar of success in life. The core of the Islamic faith is the element of submission to the path of God, and if one cuts corners and is lax in following instructions at the most micro level, this may portend spiritual failure at the macro level. In every industry, one of the most important skills is the ability to follow instructions exactly and precisely. In the field of medicine, for instance, the slightest error in medication dosing or administration can spell death for a patient.[36] Through devoutly following the instructions of God, one expresses the utmost love and reverence for one's Creator.

Another symbolism of *Muzdalifah* involves sleeping in the open rocky plains as a metaphor for the life of the grave. Human life is as short as the opportunity to beseech God's Mercy on *'Arafah,* after which we spend a temporary period of time in the barren earth before being resurrected and returning to our Lord. This again returns to the broader theme of the rituals of *Hajj* representing stages in **the afterlife**, reminding us of the inevitable journey back to Allah.

The Symbolism of *Udhiya*

The *Udhiya* refers to the **ritual sacrifice** of an animal that is performed during the *Hajj* season on or after the day of *Eid al-Adha* (the festival of the sacrifice).[37] This is one of two annual celebrations for Muslims around the world.[38] The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ instructed that the animal being sacrificed must be slaughtered in a humane manner, minimizing any pain and avoiding even making the animal feel anxious.[39] The sacrifice is an act of gratitude and devotion to God, and an act of generosity towards others as the meat of the animal is distributed to the poor and needy. Thus, we find the humanitarian spirit of Islam emphasized on the day of *Eid al-Adha*. As Muslims celebrate this day with their families, they share their blessings with others, as God states in the Qur'an that the *Hajj* rituals were prescribed "so they may experience several forms of benefit, and exalt God's name during the appointed days over the cattle which God has provided for them. So eat of them and feed the destitute and poor."[40] The emphasis on the humanitarian benefit is repeated only a few verses later, "When the animals have been sacrificed, then eat from them and feed the needy and the beggar. Thus have We subjected them to you that you may be grateful."[41] In the spirit of serving all humanity, the meat is donated to the poor, regardless of religious background.[42] The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ taught, "Donate in charity to people of all faiths."[43]

The origin of this ritual is one of the most famous stories about Abraham, the story about being commanded by God to sacrifice his son.[44] It is a story that lies at the heart of each of the religious traditions that look to Abraham as their spiritual forefather. But it is also a story that has been subjected to much polemical abuse. New Atheist pundits like Christopher Hitchens famously attacked this story as the prime example of what is wrong with religion. What kind of God would command a father to kill his own son? What kind of father would agree to perform such an act? And what kind of religion would venerate a man who agreed to kill his own son because he believed God instructed it?

Reflecting on these objections is imperative: to ensure that we have correctly understood the story ourselves and are able to properly represent its lessons to others, and also to see why these objections misrepresent the story. To be sure, what was asked of Abraham was a tremendous test of devotion. When Abraham migrated for the sake of God, abandoning his home, his belongings, having nothing but his faith in God, he prayed, "My Lord, grant me a child from the righteous," to which God states, "So We gave him the glad tidings of a gentle son."[45] We can only imagine the immense love Abraham had for Ishmael, which continued to grow day by day, as Ishmael grew into a little boy, till he reached the age when he could walk behind his father. And that's precisely when the most difficult commandment came —the request to sacrifice that which was most beloved to him.

When we examine the matter closely, we find that there are several key features of the Islamic narrative of Abraham's sacrifice that demonstrate why misgivings about the ethical import of the story are misplaced. A central tenet of Islamic theology explains why there is no tension in this story between doing what is good for creation (ethics) and doing what God wills (religion): at the basis of Islamic theology is the notion that Allah is the Most Merciful, and that Allah would never ordain suffering or harm for any human being, "Verily, God does not will oppression for any of His creation."[46]

The profound reality that critics of this story cannot fathom is Abraham's certitude that, no matter how intensely and immensely he loved Ishmael, God's love for Ishmael was infinitely greater. Indeed, as the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ described, God loves humanity more than a mother loves her own child.[47] Abraham knew that following the commandments of Allah would never lead to harm, and somehow, in the end, the results would be good even if he did not understand how. This is the epistemic aspect that critics neglect; the fact that Abraham—as a prophet—possessed certain knowledge of what God was commanding[48] and certain knowledge that God's Will is moral and good, explains why he knew that following God's instruction would not result in an evil outcome.[49] This is not some random individual claiming to have been spoken to by God—this is Abraham who emerged unscathed from the blazing pit of fire into which his people threw him,[50] Abraham who witnessed with his own eyes the physical miracle of resurrection,[51] and witnessed the secrets of the heavens and the earth in order to be amongst those with unparalleled certitude.[52]

Secondly, a unique feature of the Qur'anic narrative is that Abraham actually approaches his son and speaks to him about the matter: "O my dear son, verily I have seen in my vision that I am to sacrifice you, what is your perspective on this matter?" Ishmael replies to him, "O my father, do as you have been commanded, you will find me—God willing—to be amongst the patient."[53] Ishmael enters into the matter willingly and devoutly, rather than being led to the sacrifice oblivious to Abraham's intentions. There is no concealment or coercion in the Islamic narrative. This story is about the beauty of father and son both dutifully trusting in God's will, as the Qur'an states, "And then when they had both surrendered to God and he laid [Ishmael] in prostration, We called out, 'O Abraham, you have fulfilled the vision, thus do we reward the doers of good.'"[54]

Examining how classical scholars understood the story reveals how fundamentally misguided the reading of critics is. Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 H) made the following comments about why God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Ishmael:

The benefit in commanding His friend Abraham to sacrifice his son was not so that the sacrifice would occur, but rather so that both the father and the son would submit firmly and completely to His commandment. Once that benefit

occurred, the [actual carrying out of the] killing became harmful for them both. Therefore, God abrogated it [and commanded Abraham to sacrifice a lamb instead]. This is the true and curative answer in this matter.[55]

The Danish existentialist philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard (d. 1855 CE), was fascinated by the apparent dilemma between faith and morality in the story of Abraham. Kierkegaard felt that this story epitomized the true meaning of faith, and he felt that many Christians had failed to appreciate the profundity of it. He dedicated his philosophical work *Fear and Trembling* to the story of Abraham's sacrifice, focusing psychologically on the anxiety that Abraham must have felt while going through this experience with his beloved son. Although it represents a complex work with many interpretations, a central theme that emerges from his work is the idea that Abraham at no point was committed to doing something unethical, such as murder. Rather, Abraham knew that even though what was being asked *seemed* immoral, since God would never order something that was truly immoral, he was required to trust that the ultimate result would be something morally good. Thus, Abraham took a leap of faith (which Kierkegaard termed a "teleological suspension of the ethical") in trusting that God would spare his son.[56] In this manner, Kierkegaard distinguishes between a kind of blind obedience that would entail being comfortable performing an unethical deed, versus the true faith which entails maintaining one's ethical concerns but trusting that ultimately good will come about in following what is known with certainty to be from God.

The famous Qur'anic exegete, Imam al-Shawkani (d. 1250 H) makes an interesting comment in this regard. He states,

When Abraham positioned Ishmael for the sacrifice, a call from the direction of the Mountain informed him, "O Abraham, you have fulfilled the vision," thus making his fulfillment based solely on his firm resolve (to perform the deed) despite not actually performing the sacrifice. That's because he went as far as he could, and what was intended was just for both of them (Abraham and Ishmael) to surrender and submit to God (not the specific act of ritual slaughter), which they successfully performed.[57]

In sum, according to this narrative, Abraham's response was not, "I'm okay with killing my child because God said so," as the New Atheist caricature suggests, but rather it was, "God is asking me to do something tremendously difficult, but I trust in God knowing that if I follow this path, God will be there for Ishmael and me, and God will protect us from harm. God will accept our devotion and trust in Him and lead us to something better." This form of trust is in some sense analogous to the well-known "trust fall" exercise where someone allows himself or herself to fall backwards, trusting the other participant

to catch them. Such a person knows that falling is bad and does not desire to hit the ground and injure themselves, but rather they demonstrate their total trust that the other participant will rescue them from harm before they make impact with the ground. Therefore, viewed in its proper light, this story represents a most brilliant and powerful testament to true spirituality and devotion. Though God does not ask us to sacrifice our children, life will bring many difficult challenges where it takes a lot to stand up for what is right, to be willing to endure suffering to bring about positive change. We may lose our wealth, our family, or even more. True faith does *not* mean discarding one's moral values or ethics in favor of a mindless commitment to arbitrary instructions. Rather true faith means being prepared to depart with whatever our hearts may hold dear, to sacrifice that which is most precious to us, when we know we can seize an opportunity to do what is right for the sake of God and to serve His creation. Because, in the end, we know that God will be with those who strive to do good in His path.[58]

The Symbolism of *Jamarat*

Jamarat (lit. pl. the place of pebbles) refers to three specific places in Mina, near Makkah. Pilgrims visit the Jamarat during the *Hajj* and pelt the three *Jamarat* pillars with pebbles. According to one narration, this ritual is said to commemorate the actions of Abraham while he was en route to sacrifice his son Ishmael, to fulfill the instruction of God. After Abraham was convinced that slaughtering Ishmael was the will of God, on his way to his son he was confronted three times by the devil who attempted to dissuade him. And each time Abraham responded by pelting him with stones.[59]
Despite the misconception on the part of some pilgrims that they are physically pelting Satan when they throw stones at the *Jamarat,* this is actually a *symbolic* exercise that commemorates the actions of Abraham. This exercise reminds the pilgrim to be conscious of both the internal and external evils in the world that seek to tempt us away from God and away from righteousness. And it reminds us that faith and sincerity will always be accosted and confronted by external forces, and therefore the believer should be prepared to struggle when seeking to attain the pleasure of God.

Conclusion

As humans, we strive to grow morally and spiritually, and reach our full potential while struggling against the arduous trials and tribulations that befall us. Through the symbolic language of rituals, we discover a layer of meaning in our lives that speaks to our core

sense of self: who we are, where we have come from, and for what purpose we exist. The greatest journey is the spiritual journey towards God, to achieve knowledge of Our Creator and experience Him in our lives, and the physical journey of the *Hajj* encapsulates many powerful rituals that awaken us to our relationship with the Divine and with one another.

Notes

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1 Bell, C. M. (1997). *Ritual: Perspectives and dimensions*. Oxford University Press, 252.
2 Kevin Edward Schilbrack, *Thinking through rituals: Philosophical perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 72.
3 Bell, C. M. (1997). *Ritual: Perspectives and dimensions*. 198, 254.
4 Peter Burke and Roy Porter, *The social history of language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 223.
5 Bell, C. M. (1997). *Ritual: Perspectives and dimensions*, 82.
6 Kevin Edward Schilbrack, *Thinking through rituals: Philosophical perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 48.
7 *Sahih Bukhari*, 1804.
8 *Sunan ibn Majah*, 1680.
9 Ibn Manzur (d. 711 H). *Lisan al-Arab*. (Beirut: Dar Sader 1955). vol. 3, p. 274.
10 Ibn Taymiyyah, *Jami' Al-Rasa'il* (Maktabat Al-Turath Al-Islami), 284:2.
11 Ibn Al-Qayyim, *Madarij Al-Salikeen*, (Ihya Al-Turath Al-Arabi), 3:28.
12 Abu Hilal Al-'Askari, *Al-Farooq Fi Al-Lugha*, (Dar Al-'Ilm), 215.
13 *Sunan An-Nasa'i*, *Hadith* #3014.
14 Malcolm X's (Al-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) *Letter from Mecca*, accessed August 17, 2017, **http://islam.uga.edu/malcomx.html**.
15 The Qur'an mentions that the foundations of the Ka'bah were raised by Abraham and Ishmael (Qur'an 2:127); however, scholars have differed over whether this was the very first time it was constructed. A narration from Ibn Abbas states that the foundations were already present before. Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ stated that the time between the construction of the Ka'bah and Bayt al-Maqdis was 40 years (*Sahih Bukhari* 3186), which doesn't correspond to the time between Abraham and Solomon (i.e., thousands of years), and on the basis of this point, Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597 H) suggested that both were actually originally constructed by Prophet Adam, 40 years apart. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (d. 852 H) cites and supports this conclusion and lists a number of evidences and arguments that indicate that the Ka'bah was first built by Prophet Adam himself. He cites a report from Qatadah ibn Di'amah (d. 117 H) that states, "Allah founded the Ka'bah with Adam when he descended. Adam missed the voices of the angels and their *tasbeeh*. So Allah said, 'O Adam I have designated a House around which humanity will make *tawaf* just as *tawaf* is

performed around my Throne, so journey to it.'" (See Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bari*, Cairo: Dar al-Rayan l'il-Turath, 1987. vol. 6, pp. 467-471).

16 Al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulum al-Deen*, (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm 2005), p. 318.

17 The Black Stone marks the eastern corner of the Ka'ba, and is said to be a stone from Paradise sent down to Earth and blackened with the sins of mankind (*Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, 877). There is also a weak narration attributed to Ibn Abbas that states, "The Black Stone is (a symbol of) God's right Hand on Earth, so whoever greets it and kisses it, it is as if they have greeted God and kissed His Hand" (Ibn Adi, *al-Kamil* 1/336). Ibn Qutaybah al-Daynuri (d. 276 H) states, "This is just an analogy, the basis of which is that when one greets a king, one kisses his hand, so it is as if the Black Stone has the station of the right hand of The King" (Ibn Qutaybah, *Ta'wil Mukhtalif al-Hadith*, Cairo: Dar Ibn Affan, p. 406). He also mentions a report from Aisha (ra) that when God took the primordial covenant from humanity, He placed it in the Black Stone (*ja'ala dhalika fi'l-hajar al-aswad*). Thus, the symbolic significance may also extended to humanity renewing their covenant with God when kissing the Black Stone.

18 *Sahih Muslim*, 1270.

19 *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 3364.

20 Ibid.

21 *Sahih Bukhari*, 3179. This expression highlights Hajar's importance to the ummah (followers) of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and it has diverse interpretations. One possibility is that it indicates that this *ummah* was born at that moment of God's answering Hajar with the spring of *Zamzam*.

22 Al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulum al-Deen*, p. 319.

23 The name *'arafah* comes from the linguistic root word "to recognize" and a plethora of conjectural suggestions have been made as to why this name originally was chosen. Some suggestions include that it was here that Abraham recognized the rituals of Hajj after being taught by Angel Jibreel, or it was here that Adam was reunited on Earth with Hawwa, and so on. See *Tafsir al-Baghawi* (verse 2:198).

24 *Abu Dawud*, 1949.

25 *Sahih Muslim*, 1348.

26 Al-Dhahabi, *Mizan Al-I'tidal*, 4:381.

27 Al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulum al-Deen*, p. 319.

28 Qur'an, 38:16.

29 Qur'an, 22:55.

30 Qur'an, 19:39.

31 Qur'an, 2:85.

32 Qur'an, 50:42.

33 Qur'an, 40:15

34 Ibn Mandhur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, (Dar Sader 2003), vol. 7, p. 49 (**online**). An example of a similar linguistic usage in the Qur'an is 26:64.

35 *Sahih Bukhari*, 1674.

36 For instance, an error confusing intravenous vincristine and intrathecal methotrexate resulted in the deaths of patients with leukemia. Dyer Clare. Doctors suspended after injecting wrong drug into spine *BMJ* 2001; 322 :257.

37 There is a classical difference of opinion over whether it is an obligation (Hanafi school of law) or an emphasized recommendation (Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanbali schools), and also a difference of opinion over whether it is prescribed for everyone (Shafi'i), only for non-travelers (Hanafi), or only for non-pilgrims (Maliki), along with other positions in between.

38 The other being *Eid al-Fitr* (festival of ending fasting) which follows the month of Ramadan.

39 The Prophet ﷺ said, "When you slaughter, you should use a good method, for one of you should sharpen his knife, and give the animal as little pain as possible" (*Sahih Muslim* 1955).

40 Qur'an, 22:28.

41 Qur'an, 22:36.

42 Ibn Qudamah al-Maqdisi (d. 620 H), *al-Mughni* (Riyadh: Dar Alam al-Kutub 1999) vol. 13, p. 381.

43 *Musannaf ibn Abi Shaybah*, 10494.

44 In the Islamic tradition, the son is identified as Ishmael according to the predominant opinion amongst scholars based on indications in the Qur'an, as articulated by Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 H) in *Majmu al-Fatawa* (Dar al-Wafa' 2001, vol. 4, p. 204). Meanwhile, exegetes like Ibn Jareer al-Tabari (d. 320 H) and al-Qurtubi (d. 671 H) supported the viewpoint that it was Isaac (see their respective commentaries on 37:101-2).

45 Qur'an, 37:100-101.

46 Qur'an, 3:108.

47 *Sahih Bukhari*, 5999.

48 It has been stated in *Tafsir al-Qurtubi* (37:102) that he witnessed these visions for three consecutive nights, and in Islamic theology the visions of prophets constitute revelation, as related in Sahih Bukhari (refer to Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari* 6581).

49 Most of the objections have the underlying epistemological presumption that the one making the claim about what God has commanded him to do is probably deluded or insane, because *in reality* there is no God telling him to do this or that. However, if it is established with absolute certainty that God has in fact commanded a deed to be performed, a deed which seems to conflict with our ethical sensibilities, what then is the correct course of action? On Ash'arite theology, by Divine command theory, the ethical is defined as whatever God has ordained so this becomes the ethical course of action, while on Hanbalite-Salafist, Maturidite and Mu'tazilite theology, fundamental ethical realities are rationally discernible, so God's commandments always correspond with what sound reasoning identifies as truly ethical. If something seems otherwise, it's because we haven't studied it sufficiently. The Qur'an states that when people attempt to justify immoral actions

by stating God commands it, the correct response is to state, “Verily, God does not command evil” (Qur'an 7:28).

50 Qur'an 21:69.

51 Qur'an 2:260.

52 Qur'an 6:75.

53 Qur'an, 37:102. The Qur'anic exegete, Mahmud al-Alusi (d. 1270 H) notes that this demonstrates the humility of Ishmael in not boldly asserting that he was personally patient, but rather saying that he would be amongst those who are patient if God wills.

54 Qur'an 37:103-105.

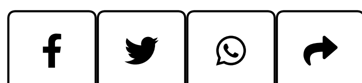
55 Tallal M. Zeni, *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Knowledge: from Key to the Blissful Abode* (Miftah Dar al-Sa’ada), p. Xxii. Cited as Miftah, p. 392.

56 Alastair Hannay. *Homing in on Fear and Trembling*. In: Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Critical Guide. (Cambridge University Press 2015) edited by Daniel Conway. p. 13.

57 Al-Shawkani, *Fath al-Qadir*, (Beirut: Dar al-Marefah 2007) p. 1246. There is a classical theological debate between the Mu’tazilah and the Ashaa’irah on this issue which Al-Razi (d. 606 H) recounts (*Mafatih al-Ghayb* 37:102). The Mu’tazilah hold that Abraham was only commanded by God to perform the steps leading to the sacrifice, not the sacrifice itself, and thus he fulfilled the vision despite never sacrificing Ishmael. Meanwhile the Ashaa’irah contend that the actual sacrifice itself was what he was commanded to perform.

58 There is one other element of the New Atheist critique of the story that is logically fallacious—when one is committed to the idea that humans are mere biological animals without special status or sanctity, why is human sacrifice morally objectionable but animal sacrifice is not? If human life is categorically no different from an animal life, what gives humans the right to take the life of an animal for consumption? For Muslims, this right comes only from Divine permission (with the condition that the animal is not killed for sport but that we consume the meat and slaughter the animal in a humane manner), and thus Divine blessing is sought before slaughtering any animal in order for it to be *halal* (permissible).

59 *Musnad Ahmad*, 2791. This *hadith* was authenticated by Ahmad Shakir while Nasir al-Din al-Albani declared it weak. Some scholars adopting al-Albani’s view have also opined that since there is no conclusively authentic source to link the practice to Abraham’s pelting the devil, the *Jamarat* bear no relation to this event. However, they fail to provide an alternative for the origin of the ritual of pelting the *Jamarat*.





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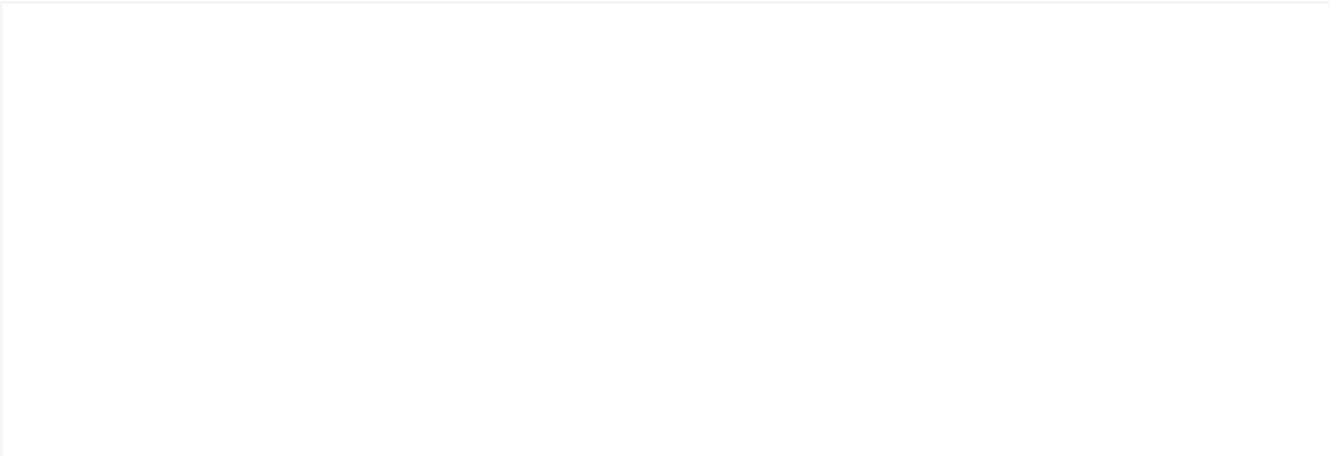
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